

ENHANCING RESEARCH OUTCOMES BY ENGAGING WITH DECISION MAKERS

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Disaster researchers conduct work that is relevant to policy making. For example, identifying and understanding the needs of vulnerable populations, advancing climate adaptation goals, and designing best practices for hazard mitigation are all useful for decision makers. This check sheet helps researchers develop plans, practical recommendations, and materials to successfully engage with local or state-level decision makers interested in topics related to hazards and disasters. It also includes information on sharing your research and developing collaborations with decision makers.

WHERE TO BEGIN

As a researcher, you can engage with decision makers in many ways. You can share your research through policy briefs, attend community events, or even visit them in their offices for one-on-one meetings. However, before you begin, you need to understand who the decision makers are, their priorities, and how to best communicate your findings in a way that aligns with their needs.

UNDERSTAND THE “WHO” AND “HOW”

To get your research or work in front of decision makers, you first need to know “Who” is involved in the decision-making processes that relate to your area of expertise. Second, you will need to learn “How” decisions are made in that area. This includes but is not limited to the process of passing a law, creating regulations, and establishing new programs. It is also important to consider the current political context. Answering the questions below will help you identify the “who” and “how.”

» **“Who” is involved in your area of expertise?**

- Who are the decision makers, such as officials or agencies, that might be interested in the disaster topics you study?
- What positions do they hold and what decision-making bodies (e.g., committees, advisory councils, etc.) are they on? For example, a Colorado-based disaster researcher who works on community resiliency may want to reach out to someone in the [Colorado Resiliency Office](#).

» **“How” are decisions made around your area of expertise?**

- Is your research relevant to the legislative process? If yes, what committees are part of this process?
- Are decisions in your field made through agencies, such as departments of emergency management and/or through legislation?
- Are there specific political considerations, such as the need to work across party lines to pass a new bill, that you should consider?
- What is the current political context and discourse around the area of interest?

DEVELOPING PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND MATERIALS

Now that you understand the “Who” and “How” of the policy space in your area, you can begin to craft a narrative around your work. This will provide decision makers with your key research points, including relevant context and background information, existing solutions and recommendations, and potential beneficiaries.

- » **What information is important for decision makers?**
 - Research produces diverse types of data—whether qualitative or quantitative—about populations, problems, and future challenges. It is important to provide decision makers with the information you think is essential and the reasons why you suggest certain best practices.
 - For example, Trujillo-Falcón et al. (2021) conducted research on emergency communication in Spanish. For their work, they used tables to compare different Spanish word choices used to relay thunderstorm severity. Decision makers could use this information for choosing which languages to use in emergency communication.
- » **What is your goal for impact?**
 - It is important to understand how policy makers may use your research to make policy. To help inform their decisions, you should clarify challenges, gaps, and best practices that you encounter or develop from your research. You should also clearly state the desired outcomes from recommendations.
 - * Note: it is better if you have something that can be measured (e.g., dollars, lives, infrastructure saved) so that decision makers can later see the outcome of your policy or program recommendations. For example, the National Institute of Building Sciences (2019) compares investment dollars in mitigation to the amount of savings, showing that for every \$1 invested in natural hazard mitigation, \$6 is saved.
- » **Who benefits from your recommendations?**
 - It is essential to identify who will benefit from your research and recommendations. By putting your research in the context of the communities that decision makers serve, you can help motivate behavioral change. Remember, you will need to clearly communicate who, what, or where is meant to benefit, whether that is a specific location like Colorado or population group such as children, for example.
- » **How can you make your research findings accessible?**
 - Plan a short (less than 30 minutes) presentation of key points for decision makers.
 - Create 1- to 2-page printouts to give to decision makers.
 - * Examples include: a 1-page summary of key points from your research, a list of important terminology, a flow chart of your research methods.
 - Use clear language. Do this by including informative images, avoiding using field-specific terminology, and keeping explanations brief.

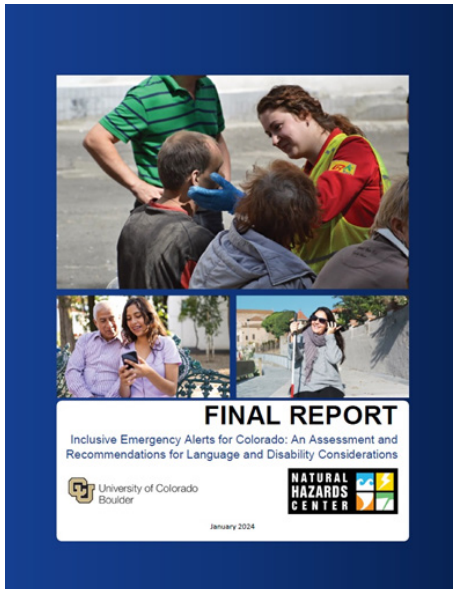
GETTING OUT THERE

Depending on the research context and type of engagement you are looking for, you might connect with decision makers at the beginning, middle, or end of your project. The timing will influence how you reach out and engage.

- » **Sharing Your Work with Decision Makers**
 - Contact decision makers by visiting statehouses, calling legislators’ offices, showing up to community meetings, sharing your research during public comment periods, or working through established local networks.
 - To ensure that you are engaging with people who can make a difference, approach decision makers where you live, work, or go to school. Politicians, especially, are accountable to their constituents. You can leverage this by sharing your research with your own representatives.
 - Be prepared to reach out when your research topic is top of mind. Major disasters open policy windows, even if briefly, that can provide opportunities to be heard by decision makers when your research is especially relevant.
- » **Collaborating Directly with Decision Makers**
 - Some research may benefit from involving decision makers more directly throughout the project. To find potential partners, consider mutual connections and your institution’s network. You can also contact organizations that bridge the gap between researchers and decision makers, such as the [Scholars Strategy Network](#) and the [Natural Hazards Center](#) at the University of Colorado Boulder.
 - Keep in mind that you may need to reach out early during the initial research stage to identify ways of incorporating the information needs of decision makers before a project starts and to align with policy-making timelines.

» **A Success Story**

- In 2023, the Natural Hazards Center worked collaboratively with Colorado state representatives to conduct research on [Inclusive Alerts and Warnings for People with Limited English Proficiency and People with Disabilities](#) (MacPherson et al., 2024). This project involved conducting a state-wide survey and meeting with people who send emergency alerts. This project was implemented through a state house bill (HB23-1237) and produced several recommendations for best practices. The research team also presented the results at the Colorado State Capitol, following publication of the final report in both English and Spanish.



YOUR RESEARCH CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Your research contributions can make a difference in the lives of those most at risk to hazards and disasters. By making your research available to decision makers, you can help to ensure that policy and program decisions are science- and evidence-based. Furthermore, connecting with decision makers will also help you contribute to improving the outcomes of communities, populations, and people in the context of disasters.

Remember that decision-making differs from academia. When working collaboratively with decision makers, timelines may be tighter, project scopes may be narrower or more fluid, and collaborators may require presentations or additional materials. It is important to be open to these differences, as working and engaging with decision makers is an important way to ensure that your research has an impact.

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